



Irfan Shahid and his wife, Mary, at the Dumbarton Oaks opening of term reception, September 2012.

Irfan Shahîd

(1926–2016)

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It is a challenge to describe the illustrious contributions of Irfan Shahîd to Byzantine Studies. A polymath, lively philologist, literary critic, poet, and historian, he was also a poised and polished public lecturer, an engaging conversationalist, and an omnivorous reader. His scholarly productivity was prodigious: books, articles, translations into English of Arabic texts (in one case, an Arabic translation of a lost Greek treatise by the fourth-century philosopher and orator Themistios), orations, lectures, reviews, and interviews. To this one must add numerous letters and postcards on Byzantino-arabica, the field he created and developed (very few of his letters were electronic, unless sent via his wife, Mary Shiber Shahîd, indispensable companion and helper). For decades he was *the* authority on that subject.

Irfan Shahîd was born as Irfan Kawar (Qa'wâr) in Nazareth, Palestine, into a Palestinian Greek family, on 15 January 1926. He left for the University of Oxford in 1946 and completed his undergraduate degree there in Classics and Greco-Roman History. His interest in the place of Arabs in the Roman empire brought him to Princeton, where he studied with the great Philip Hitti, earning his doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies in 1954. He then was appointed a Junior Fellow at Dumbarton Oaks (1954–1955), which was the beginning of a lifelong love for the institute and for his chosen field of studies, which joined his homeland and his training in one. Shahîd would go on to have appointments at Dumbarton Oaks as a Visiting

Fellow (1960–1961, 1972–1973), a Visiting Scholar (1975–1976), an Associate Fellow of Byzantine Studies (1979–1984, 1999–2008), and, finally, an Honorary Affiliate Fellow of Byzantine Studies, which he combined with his professorship at Georgetown University. In 1956, he was given permanent resident status by President Eisenhower himself, in a signing statement, on the grounds of his having been erroneously issued an exchange-visitor visa at time of entry into the United States.¹ He later changed his name to Shahîd for undocumented reasons.

The second and third centuries CE of the Roman empire were for him the foundations for what became his comprehensive studies of the history and culture of Byzantium and the Arabs. In 1984 he published *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantine and the Arabs* and followed it immediately by *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (1984). He then expanded his research to cover the rise of Islam and Arab conquests of Byzantine lands. His comprehensive studies *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (1989), and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (four volumes, 1995–2010) were informed by thorough investigation of all the available textual and epigraphic sources. At the time of his death, Shahîd was working on the final volume of his corpus, on Byzantium and the Arabs in the seventh century.

1 <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-upon-signing-bill-for-the-relief-irfan-kawar>.

In addition, his numerous articles on Byzantino-arabica, complementing and completing his monographs, were collected in three volumes.

Shahîd's scholarship was original and unique.² Hitherto scholarly knowledge about relationships of Arabs with Byzantium had been skimpy at best—the field requires knowledge of many languages, including Arabic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin; only a few, like Shahîd, were up to the task. Shahîd conceived of a “symbiotic” relationship between Byzantium and the Arabs and fleshed out the inadequately understood history of Arabs within and without the Byzantine empire from the fourth century on. He thought of his research as the “recovery” of Christian Arab history, society, and culture, and hoped to provide the necessary correlative story for the East as Gibbon had done for the West in his description of the decline and fall of Rome. Among Shahîd's many important recoveries are his discoveries of and explanations for the conversion of many Arabs to Christianity in the fourth century. He explained the terms “phylarch” and “phylarchate” in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. He likewise interpreted the role of Arabs as “federated” allies and dependents of the Roman or Byzantine empires, and detailed what those treaties and dependencies consisted of. He explained titles and symbols of Arab leaders, their honors and headbands (not crowns) as celebrated and coveted in their society and confirmed by Roman and Byzantine imperial ceremonies or diplomacy. He brought names of hitherto unstudied Arab “tribes” as Tanukh and Salihids into prominence by citing and discussing Greek as well as Arabic texts. More than anyone else, Shahîd successfully investigated the neglected Ghassanid Arabs, who emerged around 500, and their economic, social, and cultural history. He explained Ghassanid preferences in food, drink, and banqueting, supporting his conclusions by drawing on his vast knowledge of early Arabic verse. He convincingly investigated the ecclesiastical structures, relationships, and the presence of monasteries among the Ghassanids and their relationship to Monophysitism. He conceptualized and emphasized their role as a

protective “shield” on the eastern frontier against enemies of the Byzantine empire, whether Persian Sasanids or hostile Arabs. Among his many and major contributions to Byzantine historical studies was his thesis that the Ghassanids were a sedentary, not a nomadic tribe, having migrated from south Arabia to Arabia's north. In like manner, he reinterpreted the reign of Emperor Maurice (582–602), overturning established, positive historical evaluations that prevailed in the 1950s. He believed that Maurice's reign was the decisive turning point in the history of the ancient and medieval Near East, and he showed that Maurice's misguided Arab policies created opportunities for the successful and irrevocable Muslim conquest of the Near East in the early and middle seventh century, resulting thereby in a permanent and fundamental transformation of the Near East's culture, society, and religion. Along with his reconstruction of Ghassanid life, Shahîd's severe negative judgment on Emperor Maurice's Arab policies has been seminal for the field. Some of his other serious contributions to Byzantine studies are real but may be more difficult to trace. For instance, his many oral responses to scholarly queries and dialogues over the years helped shape and tilt others' interpretations and ways of thinking without necessarily receiving explicit acknowledgment. One point is clear: without Shahîd, Byzantine-Arab studies today would look very different and probably very threadbare—full of large gaps and errors in many places—and it is inconceivable to imagine Byzantine-Arab studies without his fundamental published scholarship and oral communications.

Extensive travels in the Near East, especially in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in regions east of the Dead Sea, enriched his publications. He lectured as smoothly in Amman as he did at the International Congresses of Byzantine Studies. One remarkable public lecture I recall, “Anno Domini 717,” which Shahîd delivered at the Spring 1962 Medieval Academy of America Annual Meeting, held that year at the Harvard Faculty Club, unfortunately remains unpublished and it is unclear whether any hard copy survives somewhere. At that moment he was a faculty member at Indiana University at Bloomington (1960–1963), but he was just about to move permanently to Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where in 1963 he took up the position of Professor of Arabic (from 1981, the Sultanate of Oman Professor of Arabic and Islamic Literature), appointed to teach the Quran and Arabic

2 For a lengthier overview of his scholarship in Byzantino-arabica, see Speros Vryonis Jr., “The Epic Scholarship of Irfan Shahîd: An Epic History of the Pre-Islamic Arabs and Their Relations with Byzantium from Constantine the Great to Heraclius and the Islamic Conquests of the Byzantine Diocese of Orients,” *Byzantion* 79 (2009): 435–52.

literature. Although Shahîd loved Arabic poetry and both a book, *Omar Khayyam: The Philosopher-Poet of Medieval Islam* (1982), and recitals, such as reading classical poetry at the Library of Congress (21 October 2004), are examples of his all-consuming hobby, Byzantine subject matter was his true and lifelong vocation, which he passed on to a wide spectrum of audiences in the scholarly world.

Irfan Shahîd was a lover of life, especially in his city of choice, Washington, DC. He loved water in different varieties. He loved to swim for recreation and relaxation and he loved the visual and aural pleasure of trickling fountains in the background during meals or conversations, daytime or evening. He worked long hours. He enjoyed his professorial position at Georgetown University, but relished his access to—and maximized his utilization of—the library resources and intellectual stimulus of Dumbarton Oaks. He even enjoyed driving his car; DC traffic never overwhelmed him. English was not his mother tongue but he mastered its resonances far better than most native speakers, and reviews of his books frequently remarked on his “elegant literary style.”³

Irfan Shahîd thrived in research centers such as Dumbarton Oaks, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and the Medieval Academy of America, of which he became a Fellow in 2012, but he also brought his ideas from those research centers to his university’s halls. The reciprocal, refreshing, and exhilarating reverberating process invigorated him and others. He always generously gave of his time to answer and comment on queries from other scholars, whether in person, via the mail, or by telephone, as comfortable discoursing on Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* as on Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Rubā’iyyat* of Omar Khayyam or on

lines of Latin verse. Having made several moves early in his career he had no desire to move from Dumbarton Oaks and Washington (with the exception of some very temporary term appointments or leaves). An intellectual giant himself, he acknowledged the contemporary and preceding intellectual giants of medieval, Byzantine, and Semitic studies who had passed through Dumbarton Oaks and other North American and European academic institutions and from whom he had learned and kept learning.⁴

Always challenging his active mind, Shahîd grew into a scholarly colossus during his imposing career. He developed into a combatant for neglected aspects of Christian Arab language and culture, stimulating and contributing substantially and positively to the tone of intellectual life at all his institutions, but especially at Dumbarton Oaks, where he was an excellent fit and where he flourished. His lengthy and healthy life enabled him to observe and react to intellectual changes and to fulfill almost all of his scholarly plans, the exception being his planned final volume on Byzantium and the Arabs. Irfan Shahîd was an unforgettable scholar and human being, who helped make the world better by making it more understandable through the strong penetrating light he shone on it.

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3 Issa J. Boullata, review of *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 2, pt. 2, *JAOS* 130 (2010): 465–67, at 466.

4 See his remarks about earlier scholars with whom he had come into contact at Dumbarton Oaks and contemporary scholars who informed his works in the oral history interview taken with him in August 2008, <https://www.doaks.org/research/library-archives/dumbarton-oaks-archives/historical-records/oral-history-project/irfan-shahid>.